

AN ADULTERESS FINDS FORGIVENESS

Jn 8:1-12

[A TEXTUAL CAVEAT: the passage's authenticity questioned by some, but enjoys much support]

I. THE TEMPLE SETTING

- A. Temples (Herod's, Zerubbabel's, Herod's) central to Judaism
- B. Temple important in Jesus' life and ministry
- C. Enduring importance of sanctuaries (and architectural/construction endeavors)

II. AN ADULTERESS

- A. Adultery (along with idolatry & murder) grave sins in Jewish tradition
 - 1. Sexual regulation essential for healthy societies, so adultery condemned
 - a. Euripides & ancient texts condemn "the great sin"
 - b. Homer's Penelope illustrates fidelity ideal
 - 2. Though ever-condemned, everywhere (it seems) practiced
 - a. Canaanites' Baal worship & promiscuity
 - b. Romans in Empire, though not the Republic (multiple sources show), permissive
 - c. Routine & barely condemned in contemporary (post-1968, sexual revolution) society (e.g. actors & politicians & Bachelors/Bachelorettes)
- B. Woman brought to Jesus
 - 1. Nameless? tradition re "Susannah"
 - 2. Guilt unquestioned (neither she nor Jesus defended her behavior)

III. AN ACCUSATION

- A. Religious authorities (Scribes & Pharisees) intent on trapping Jesus, illustrating Legalism
 - 1. If He endorsed Jewish Law & prescribed execution, He'd run afoul Roman Law
 - 2. If He exempted her from punishment, He'd be accused of betraying Jewish Law
- B. Legalism ever-evident
 - 1. Characteristics: reducing religion to rules & regulations, insisting on letter of Law; adding rules to Scripture (frequently reflecting, endorsing either counter-culture or culture); rejecting Grace, substituting works, for salvation
 - 2. Historical illustrations
 - a. Asceticism/rigorism—Tertullian (ca. 180 A.D.) re (especially female) dress, theater, etc; monks' unnatural self-denial;
 - b. Iconoclasm—8th century tic controversy (provoked by Islam?) & Puritans' plain churches & "social justice warrior" penchant for utilitarian barns or gyms rather than beautiful sanctuaries
 - c. Ritualism—tendency wherever Sacraments overly-hallowed—thus enduring controversy in Russian Orthodoxy regarding the sign of the cross
 - d. Sabbatarianism—Seventh Day obsession; strict rules (e.g. Puritans) for Sunday behavior
 - e. Textual fetishes—thus "King James Only" sects

IV. JESUS' RESPONSE

- A. An enlightening account: He writes in dirt—only record of Him writing & various theories as to why He did so; then He says "he without sin cast first stone" and the crowd disperses; finally, He says to the woman: go and sin no more
- B. Lessons to be learned:
 - 1. Requisite compassion when dealing with sinners: condemnation unnecessary wherever humility, confession, penitence evident
 - 2. Concurrent and equally necessary confrontation essential: sin consistently condemned
 - 3. Ultimate optimism (for even vilest of sinners) rooted in Grace and human potential to reform and live well—thus "optimism of grace" for many Wesleyans

THE SCANDAL OF ADULTERY

In *Our Oriental Heritage*, the first volume of his massive *Story of Civilization*, Will Durant noted: “The greatest task of morals is always sexual regulation; for the reproductive instinct creates problems not only within marriage, but before and after it, and threatens at any moment to disturb the social order with its persistence, its intensity, its scorn of law, and its perversions” (p. 44). If one walks with historians through the corridors of human history, Durant’s observation holds: at the core of our story stands the blessing and curse of sex! Still more: healthy societies routinely forbid adultery, which torpedoes the heart of society, the family. This stands revealed in one of Euripides’ tragedies, when (four centuries before Christ) one of the characters, Tyndareus, laments the promiscuity of his daughter, declaiming: “I despise adultery and unfaithful wives, and my daughter Clytemnestra, an adulteress and, murderess to boot, most of all” (*Orestes*, 507). Euripides also noted, in another play (*Andromache*), that: “When cheated, wife or husband feels the same” showing that both sexes know the injustice of infidelity. Thus texts from other ancient peoples, Egypt and Ugarit label adultery “the great sin,” a phrase frequently found in the Old Testament.

That it was condemned, of course, didn’t mean it was never indulged! Entering Canaan, the ancient Israelites found themselves surrounded by sexually-licentious peoples, even blending fornication with the worship of Baal! Fertility rituals and sexual orgies, requiring women to serve as temple prostitutes, trademarked the paganism of Canaan. Men used women as pleasure objects, and they also tended to treat their wives as property. Imposing a double standard, they often insisted their wives be faithful to them while feeling free to enjoy their sexual instincts in various ways. When we turn from ancient history to the final decade of the 20th century, pollsters James Paterson and Peter Kim told us, in *The Day America Told the Truth*, that infidelity marks modernity, with perhaps as many as one-third of the people acknowledging extra-marital affairs. “Everybody does it,” they falsely claim. Yet while “doing it” large numbers of these same folks disapprove it! Another poll, the National Opinion Research Center’s 1992 survey, found 91 percent of Americans judge adultery wrong, with a large majority of married spouses faithfully committed to their partners.

That’s because adultery subverts what’s truly good and what’s actually best for us. The procreation, pleasure, and emotional intimacy provided by marriage qualify it as the finest of human bonds. When entered into and maintained by a lasting *covenant*, marriage enables a man and a woman to attain what’s truly *good*. The joys of good marriage are destroyed by infidelity and divorce. Grave sin always vandalizes what’s good. Sexual sins shred the good God designed for us humans: lifelong intimacy and family ties. Pornography perversely misshapes its addicts. Prostitution reduces women to commodities, whose flesh is bought and sold without concern for the persons involved. Incest and sexual abuse destroy natural bonds between parents and children. Promiscuity turns sexually transmitted diseases into epidemics spreading infertility and death.

Most significantly: adultery dissolves the marriage bond by breaking holy vows. We live by promises, and when we break promises we open the gates to sorrow and death. Consequently, good societies seek to build walls around the sanctity of the marriage bond. Custom and law make adultery a serious offense, censored if not punished by law. “You shall not commit adultery,” reads the commandment (Ex 20:14). In Jewish law, William Barclay notes, “adultery was a serious crime. The Rabbis said: ‘Every Jew must die before he will commit idolatry, murder, or adultery.’ Adultery was one of the three gravest sins.” Thus the *Mishnah* prescribed stern (if rarely implemented) punishment: strangulation for a man, stoning for a woman.